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Exodus 19:1-6; 16-19

**God Is a Fire**

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Since we are creatures, made in the image of God, we all yearn to find holiness. It just comes in our wiring. It's part of what it means to be human. When we live too long without anything that transcends, inspires, or compels us to bend our knees, our souls begin to wither. People can walk around for a long time with dried out souls, but they know that they are not fully alive. We have to find holiness. It is the living water for our parched souls.

The irony is that every time we do encounter the holy we try to domesticate it into something unholy that we can manage. That's why you hear so much talk about God's politics, God's principles for a successful life, God's plan for the family, and God's preferences about the war. It is striking to me how much God's plans and preferences look like our own. Maybe this isn't holiness at all. Maybe all of this talk is just ourselves written in capital letters. Holiness cannot fit in your pocket. This is a lesson the Hebrews learned early in their journey with God.

Three months after the Red Sea crossing, the Hebrews came to the base of Mt. Sinai where they made camp. Here they were about to have a terrifying service of worship. Worship, if it is real, is always scary business. Like the Hebrews, we are camping today at the base of a holy mountain in our worship service. At the top of this mountain is your Creator — the one who parted the waters of the Red Sea and the waters of your baptism. This is the holy and righteous God who expects a little holiness and righteousness from you. "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, ... you shall be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." (Exodus 19:4) That's the voice from the top of the mountain. At the bottom of the mountain you and I tremble because, if the point of life's journey is to learn to obey God's voice, we don't think we are getting the point.

We don't even hear God's voice most of the time because it is drowned out by all the other voices around us. These are the voices that tell us we'll never make it to the Promised Land unless we try harder and achieve more, or buy something else, or get a different job. All of these voices speak as if the focus is on you. "What are you going to do to get life right?" they ask. But it is a terrible burden to get life just right, or as we say in church to make ourselves right-eous. That is why we are so drawn to the forms of domesticated holiness that assure us God is on our side, rooting for us to succeed, and that he will help us or give us a boost toward our dreams. But as the scriptures remind us, holiness can never be tamed like that. "God is a consuming fire."

The ancients thought that if they ever encountered God, it would kill them, which helps to explain why everyone in the New Testament is so frightened when they see an angel. So when we come to worship and camp for an hour at the base of God's mountain, we ought to remember who we've come to meet. "On the morning of the third day, there was thunder and lightning, as

well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God.” (Exodus 19:16)

There is a reason why our church does not have theater seats, drive through windows, or a latte machine in the narthex. It is the same reason that we are not peddling snake oil for your hurts in life. We are not trying to make you comfortable with holiness. We are trying to breathe life back into all of our souls. The only way to do that is to come and take our place in holy worship — where we meet the consuming fire.

The fact that some of us are not paying attention to the spiritual reality of this hour does not mean that it is not occurring. And those who are paying attention should be too overwhelmed with the glory to fret about the fact that the elements of the worship service may not match their preferences. No one at the base of Mt. Sinai dared to complain that he or she didn’t particularly care for trumpets. Lutheran pastor Marva Dawn once said that after the conclusion of worship someone complained to her that he didn’t like the hymns they sang in the service. She responded by saying, “That’s okay, we were not singing to you.”

Part of what it means to stand in the presence of holiness is to finally, at last, not be in control of the agenda. And that is the beginning of getting life back into your soul. “Remember what I did,” God said to the Hebrews, “Remember how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Remember that it was never about your hard work. Remember that it was I, the Lord God, who changed your destiny from slavery to freedom.”

Remember. Remember. Remember what God has done. It is only as we remember the past, that we can see how to move to the future. The light that God gives us, the light you have been looking for in your journey, doesn’t shine in your eyes. If it did, it would blind you. The light to our path, the lamp to our feet, shines from behind us. That is why in worship we say creeds and read the holy words of Scripture that were written thousands of years ago. It is why we participate in the church’s old cycle of Advent, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and why we sing the old hymns. It is because the greatest danger to our future is that we will not remember the past. That past proclaims, “I know you’re confused about how to get to the Promised Land, but don’t worry because it was never about you. It has always been God who has carried you on eagles’ wings, and he will carry you all the way home.”

All you have to do, according to Moses, is obey the voice of God. It was then that God gave the people the Ten Commandments. The law was a way of remembering. It was a way of seeing the light that shone from behind them and will lead home to God. But this brings us back to our deepest fear in worship. At the base of the holy mountain we remember that we have not remembered.

That is why worship begins for us with the prayer of confession: “Forgive us, O God ....” We confess this at the base of worship because in telling the hard truth about ourselves we can then hear the deeper truth of the gospel: “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.” We could never climb the

mountain to find God. It is too high and we have wandered too low. But the gospel proclaims that holiness has climbed down to us because, in Christ, God was dying to forgive us our sin.

The author of the book of Hebrews is fascinated by how the coming of Jesus Christ has transformed our approach to God. “The days are surely coming says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; not like the covenant I made with their ancestors, on the day when I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt ... for I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” (Hebrews 8:8) This is a direct quote from the prophet Jeremiah who promised that a time will come for a new covenant that is based not on our obedience but on the mercy of God. For centuries and centuries people waited at the base of the mountain of God for this time to come. In Jesus Christ, the forgiving mercy of God was finally revealed when God climbed down the mountain to come to us.

What this means is that holiness is now revealed not as thunder and lightning on a mountain top but as acts of mercy. And as it was revealed in the incarnation, so is it revealed when Christ is incarnated in your acts of mercy. Holiness is revealed to the whole world when you forgive the sinner who hurt you. It is revealed when you return good for evil. And it is revealed when you volunteer, give generously, and are merciful. Holiness is revealed when the church is at work not only in its worship service but also in its mission and in hospitals and nursing homes. It is revealed when you return to your stressful workplace tomorrow determined to do the most heroic thing humans are capable of doing — to be merciful.

Do you see how Christ has changed the whole notion of what it means to approach God? “You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.” (Hebrews 12:18) Notice that the mountain is no longer to be feared. No longer do we have to cower at the presence of God because of our sins. “But you have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ... and to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant. (Hebrews 12:22) “Therefore, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.” (Hebrews 12:28)

That last sentence is surprising. On this side of the mercy of Jesus Christ are we still talking about God as a consuming fire? Maybe you thought that the New Testament offered a kinder, gentler God than the Old Testament. No. What has changed from the old to the new covenant is not God, but you. In Christ, you are forgiven and restored and loved and freed finally to be merciful.

In Christ, you are no longer afraid of God the fire. But he is still a fire. And it is best not to try to keep fire in your pocket.

*Benediction: Fear God. But fear him not for his judgment. Fear God for his mercy and love because these are things that make him uncontrollable. Amen.*